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ABSTRACT

In New Canaan, Connecticut, several meetings were convened to communicate kindergarten expectations as they relate to the 14 preschools that feed into 3 public elementary schools in New Canaan, and to develop and systemize more effective and efficient transitional practices from the preschool arena to the public school setting. Attending the meetings were 14 preschool directors and their teachers, 17 public school kindergarten staff, and 3 elementary school principals. The outcomes of the meetings were twofold: (1) communication to the preschool population that public school kindergarten curricula were not strictly academically oriented; and (2) an examination of what preschoolers are expected to experience prior to entering kindergarten. A questionnaire was developed to educe the expectations from kindergarten teachers that would be shared with preschools. Four categories of experiences were judged most important by kindergarten teachers: social competencies, communication/language, independent skills, and fine and gross motor experiences. After lengthy discussion, the directors and preschool teachers were in agreement with the expectations. Directors indicated that they would plan specific strategy sessions to better inform their parents about their program and goals based on the agreed upon kindergarten expectations. The final decision of the group was to collaboratively write a position paper to serve as a directive for preschools and the anchor for the kindergarten philosophy that permeates the New Canaan Public Schools. (The position statement regarding the goals for kindergarten children is appended.) (KB)

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Early Year's Summit:
Honoring Children's Rights to Quality Experiences in Preschool that are Valued by Public School Kindergarten Educators and Administrators

Russ Firlik

"At the heart of the educational process lies the child… The curriculum is to be thought of in terms of activity and experience rather than knowledge to be acquired and facts to be stored. Instruction should not bewilder children because it outruns their experience. " 1.

The ever increasing changes in our society that directly impacts the post-modern family, and the schools their children attend has brought about new perspectives on the nature of the preschool and kindergarten learners in a small town in New England. In New Canaan, Connecticut, an affluent community located one hour from New York City, new perspectives in the learning communities have been realized. New Canaan, in Fairfield County, is one of the wealthiest communities in the state to support education. It rewards its public school teachers the highest salaries in the state of Connecticut, and places a high priority on "excellence" in its schools. Furthermore, New Canaan, with a population of approximately 18,000, is fortunate to have fourteen preschools to accommodate the population that feeds into the three public elementary schools of New Canaan. Accordingly, nearly all entering kindergarteners have had at least one year of a quality preschool experience.

Over this year, several meetings with preschool, kindergarten teachers and preschool directors and elementary school principals were organized to ostensibly discuss kindergarten expectations. Included in these meetings were New Canaan's fourteen preschool directors and their teachers, along with the seventeen-member public school kindergarten staff, and the three elementary school principals. From the preschools' perspective there were skeptical rumors that the public school kindergartens were

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apparently into a sort of academic bootcamp, e.g., emphasis on explicit phonemic and segmentation awareness, sight word drills, and a prescribed and challenging mathematics and writing curriculum. This was the first time such meetings have ever been arranged for the expressed purpose of communicating kindergarten expectations as it relates to the preschools that feed into the three public schools elementary schools. An unexpected opportunity also emerged from these meetings: the opportunity to develop and systemize more effective and efficient transitional practices from the preschool arena to public school setting. This area of transition was never fully developed within the two educational levels.

The outcomes of these extraordinarily informative meetings were twofold. One notion that permeated these lengthy sessions was that the public schools' kindergarten curricula were not, by other local districts' standards, strictly academically oriented. This position by the building principals and their kindergarten staff has been supported by the strong child-centered philosophy of the superintendent and the board of education. The public school kindergarten parents were well aware of the "less –academic" emphasis on the kindergartens within the district, as parent orientations and open houses stressed the intellectual development, not academic, but evidentially not the parents of preschool children. The children were not expected to be able to read, write and compute at the end of their preschool or kindergarten experiences. Children entering kindergarten after one, two and sometimes three years of preschool experience are taken from where they are - intellectually, social-emotionally and physically, and brought carefully and selectively to their level of successful progress during the kindergarten year. Unknowingly, and remarkably, this so-called universal understanding somehow never got systematically

communicated to the preschool population. The second outcome of these dialogues was in a form of an essential question: "What are the preschoolers' expected to experience during their preschool years prior to entering kindergarten? The following is what our collaborative research yielded that hopefully will have direct and practical implications for preschool children, parents, teachers, directors, and kindergarten staff and parents. Given that the traditional academic readiness were not the expected goal of a preschool experience, it was established at this "early-year's summit" that the preschool teachers and directors wanted to know what were the expected entering skills and behaviors kindergarten teachers desired. A questionnaire was prepared to educe the expectations from the kindergarten teachers that would be shared with the preschool school directors and staff representatives. Ultimately, this "white paper" would become a guide that would be shared with preschool parents before enrolling in a preschool in New Canaan.

The four categories of experiences deemed most important emerged from the seventeen kindergarten teachers and three building administrators for preschool teachers to spend quality time and effort with their children were, in rank order: Social Competencies, Communication/Language, Independent skills, and Motor: fine and gross experiences.

The results of the kindergarten teachers' prioritized responses to preschool expectations are summarized below. Most, if not all, of these expected behaviors are developmental and experiential in nature. Few, if any, have anything to do with rigorous academic readiness. Moreover, the four categories are in rank order of importance.

I. Social-Emotional Competencies- Reading social situations and behaving appropriately in social settings.

Encourage:

1. Empathy for others, including children with special needs
2. Kindness and courtesy words
3. Eye contact when speaking to others
4. Listening and conversational skills with teachers and peers in social groups
5. Being aware of personal space, hands/feet, and space of others
6. Being sensitive to other's feelings
7. Using kind words
8. Appropriate Manners
9. Patience- waiting turns
10. Following simple playground rules
11. Volume control- indoor voices
12. Following directions
13. Reading other's body language
14. Cooperation when cleaning up, less competition
15. Inviting friends to play

II. Communication and Language Experiences: (Language acquisition, usage and nursery rhymes)

Encourage:

1. Conversational Tone-
2. Familiarity with nursery rhymes and rhyming songs
3. Asking questions, asking for help, being more of an advocate for oneself
4. Using manners without prompts
5. Communicating with words, not pointing
6. Using words to solve conflicts with peers instead of tattling
7. Speaking expressively with others
8. Sitting to listen to stories and language experiences episodes

III. Skills to Promote Independence and Self- Efficacy (belief that one can succeed)

Promote:

1. Self control when frustrated and /or confused
2. Taking responsibility for belongings
3. Recognizing teachers by their names
4. Learning to function effectively in larger group with one adult
5. Zipping, buttoning, snapping clothing

6. **Opening snack and juice boxes**
7. **Washing hands**
8. **Proper use of bathroom facilities**
9. **Tying shoes-(Note: this was the only behavior/action deemed by the preschools as developmentally determined, and therefore, would not necessary hold this to be an expectation).**

IV. Motor: Fine and Gross experiences

Encourage:

1. **Outside play to develop large muscles**
2. **Experience skipping, jumping, leaping, and hopping**
3. **Capacity to play and know how to play for enjoyment**
4. **Personal space awareness when walking**
5. **Holding scissors and using them appropriately**
6. **Holding proper pencil, pen and marker grip**
7. **Using large crayons**
8. **Using varied written media; not limited to markers and crayons**
9. **Tracing skills and paper tearing practice**

Readiness Activities

a. Exposure in print, to lower and upper case letters, especially in the child's own name.
b. Recognizing own name in print, using upper and lower Case letters.
c. Using age-appropriate problem solving skills.

Soon after the rank ordered expectations were gathered, several important meetings were held. The preschool directors and teachers representatives from their respective schools met with kindergarten representatives and the three building principals. After lengthy discussion and some context related exchanges to the expectations, e.g., the addition *of "exposure in print to lower and upper case letters, especially in the child's own name,"* as opposed to the original word encourage …," and "tying shoes- as more developmentally determined, the directors and preschool teachers

were totally in agreement with the expectation results. They agreed wholeheartedly with the expectations; however, what immediately concerned the directors, were the parents' reactions and how they would have to reeducate them to these sets of expectations. Notwithstanding, the fact that this aspect of the dialogue was certainly appropriate, the directors indicated that they would plan specific strategy sessions among themselves in order to better inform their parents about their program and goals based upon the agreed upon kindergarten expectations. The preschool teachers were ecstatic! The preschool educators indicated that they were pleased with the expectation results. They indicated that this set of expectations were more akin to their thinking and training. The final decision was to collaboratively write a position paper, sponsored by both the public school administration, representing their teachers, and the preschool directors, representing their teachers. This paper was to serve both as a directive for the preschools to operate under; with respect to the parameters on the limited academic expectations, and for the preschool parents to better understand the nature of the preschool experience and how those experiences are seamlessly woven into the receiving kindergarten philosophy. After several discussions, rewrites, and editorial revisions, the kindergarten teachers, elementary principals and preschool directors completed the "position paper." This position paper will serve as the basis for the preschool goal expectations beginning next September and the anchor for the deeply held kindergarten philosophy that permeates the New Canaan Public Schools.

Summary and Transitional Practices

A couple of unexpected, yet, important tangible communications and transition aspects emerged through this thoughtful and carefully articulated cooperative effort between the preschools administration, the kindergarten teachers and building principals. The results of these articulation meetings yielded the following provisions:

(1). to communicate more often on a scheduled basis,

(2) to share our public school kindergarten curricula and articulate any changes to the existing curricula with the preschool directors,

(3) to invite the preschool educators to relevant public school in-service and pre-service workshops and seminars.

Accordingly, certainly not to be neglected are the regular contacts and honest dialogues with parents. Informing parents of our mutual child-centered philosophies, and formally inviting them to appropriate preschool and kindergarten workshops, presentations and seminars was to be further encouraged by both systems. These common sense practices have not been fully developed in the past.

Furthermore, another area of opportunity that evolved as a result of these meetings with the preschool personnel and the public school staff was an effort to keep the preschool personnel and their children more engaged in the public schools' operation. Accordingly, several newly redesigned transition practices were implemented. The following were some practices that were designed to benefit the children's transitions, and a few practices to benefit preschool directors, teachers and parents:

Transition practices to
benefit children, teachers and parents:

A). The Role of the Public School Educators and Administrators

1. Arrange to have the preschools' directors, teachers, and children visit their new public school kindergarten classes during the spring before preschools close for the summer. This could be organized around the public school registration time in January. This kindergarten "Registration - Celebration" could serve both as a registration time and as an orientation to the public schools.
2. Forward all up-to-date Kindergarten information about curricula and public schools' operations to preschool personnel and parents prior to the children's entrance into Kindergarten.
3. Public schools' administration actively seeks to have our preschool colleagues join in relevant workshops, and seminars offered by the public schools.
4. Have an "open house" for entering kindergarteners and their parents prior to the opening of school to familiarize children and parents with the new school setting.

B. Continuing Role for the Preschool and Public Schools

1. To develop mutually, more systematic methods of documenting children's progress during the preschool years. Accordingly, we must design forms that are practical and provide relevant information about each child for the receiving kindergarten teachers. These new forms should accurately represent the systematic methods used in the documentation of children's experiences at the preschools. What was decided was to create a focus group of kindergarten and preschool teachers, along with a few

directors and principals, to forge this systematic documentation forward for next year. New documentation strategies were also designed.

We are only beginning to assess and understand the benefits of informed and systematic communication between and among our preschool practitioners and public school kindergarten teachers.

Conclusion

If the kindergarten is to remain a vital and dynamic educational institution serving children and communities, early childhood educators, preschool and kindergarten, will need to assess and reassess what we do with young children in kindergarten. Through this assessment we may confirm that what we have been doing remains educationally sound. We may learn that we need to expand, revise, and modify our approaches to the realities of young children. We may even be challenged to substitute new activities for traditional ones so that our kindergartens can help children remain excited about learning and confident within their learning communities. To deepen the articulation already formed and a process implemented, next year, we shall begin to share our preschool and kindergarten expectation results with the first grade teams across the district. We shall see where we go from there.

It remains, as it has always has, that the child is the agent of his or her own learning. Activity and experience, both physical and mental, are often the best means of gaining knowledge, and understanding facts. Understanding is best facilitated when knowledge is gained within the appropriateness of children's previous first-hand experiences.

This was a phenomenal year of mutual intellectual engagements and collaborative negotiated efforts between and among the preschool and the public school practitioners, along with, the administrative teams. I am reminded of what Professor David Hawkins observed many years ago, "The knowledge of practitioners is meaningfully deeper than any found in the thought of many academic researchers; therefore, the teacher must be treated not as an object of study but as an interpreter of educational phenomena." 2.

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Honoring Our Young Children: A Statement of Beliefs

By the Preschool Directors, Elementary School Principals and Teachers Of New Canaan, Connecticut

Position Paper #2

As a group, we, the preschool directors, elementary school principals, preschool teachers and kindergarten teachers of New Canaan believe that children's success in school is, in large part, related to events and experiences that occur prior to their entry into kindergarten. Early childhood is a special time of wonder, imagination and discovery. Teachers cherish and strive to protect each child's journey through childhood. Young children need knowledge and new experiences to develop and thrive.

The early years mark a period of rapid change in the ways children think about themselves and the world around them. Too much exposure to television, computer games and organized activity robs children of their childhood and may produce the "hurried child syndrome." Additionally, too much exposure to formal academics too early in a child's development may cause a child to grow resistant to the excitement of learning.

As educators of young children, we value childhood and want to keep it protected. It is imperative for us to ensure that children develop the skills and acquire the knowledge needed to provide them with a firm foundation for their later years. Toward that end, we endorse and value the following skills, knowledge and experiences as appropriate goals for young children entering their kindergarten school year.

Social-Emotional Skills

In order to be successful in a kindergarten classroom, children need to be able to exert self-control when frustrated, listen, follow directions, be polite, take turns, carry out basic management routines without direct supervision and begin to read non-verbal language.

A child's social skills directly affect the quality and success of the school experience. Young children construct understanding by interacting with others and with their environment. Throughout the early childhood years, educators emphasize sensitivity to the feelings of others, kindness, patience and cooperation. These social-emotional competencies are best achieved through play and play-related activities.

Communication Skills

Communication and language skills are critical to children's social, emotional and cognitive well-being. Throughout the early childhood years, we encourage children to develop increasingly sophisticated language skills through social interactions, dramatic play and age- appropriate activities. In order to communicate effectively, children must be able to determine appropriate conversational tone and volume, advocate for

themselves, employ situation-appropriate vocabulary to put feelings into words, be mannerly without prompting, and use language to discuss activities and events

Self-Help Skills

Children gain confidence and self-esteem as they become more independent. Throughout the early years, children should master important self-help skills, including the ability to:

* Recognize teachers and other children by name
* Respect property and materials that belong to others
* Manage one's own clothing, including buttons, zippers and snaps
* Wash hands and use the bathroom independently
* Manage snacks independently
* Tie shoes when developmentally appropriate

Fine and Gross Motor Skills

Educational progress hinges largely upon the acquisition of fine and gross motor skills. Proper diet, adequate rest and good physical health habits go far in helping to set the stage for early success in these skills. Young children need exposure to a variety of rich activities designed to help them:

* Develop large muscles, including upper-body strengthening
* Experience skipping, jumping, hopping, climbing and balancing
* Play for exploration, imagination and enjoyment
* Develop awareness of personal space while walking, running and playing
* Use comfortable but proper grip when using crayons, markers and pencils
* Use scissors properly and safely
* Experience a variety of art materials.

Language Readiness Skills

A child's approach to learning is central to his/her success in school. Curiosity and the desire to learn come from positive, age appropriate experiences with story, language and problem solving, as well as exposure to new ideas and experiences in the arts and sciences. Throughout early childhood, children need to develop the ability to listen and comprehend a story being read aloud. Children also need to develop the language and thinking ability necessary to retell and sequence a story. Recognizing and generating rhymes in games and songs and poetry form the foundation for understanding rhythms and patterns in language. Young children are ready to acquire familiarity with upper and lower case letters and to develop the ability to problem solve.

Conclusion

Our goal is to encourage children to explore, to wonder, to imagine, to experiment with language and materials, to play and to develop a lifelong love of learning.

We believe that there is great potential in each young child. It is our responsibility, as educators and parents, to nurture that potential in developmentally appropriate ways and to help children develop respect for the world around them. The "work" of young children is to grow daily in appreciation of themselves, to become curious explorers who possess a love of learning, and to achieve social competence as they experience the joy of their preschool and kindergarten years.